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The Devil in the Details

Not Deer, or a Deer?

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The Appalachian region of the United States is allegedly home to several well-known cryptids including Mothman, the Appalachian Chupacabra, the Pennsylvanian White Bigfoot, and many others. To that list we may add more recent reported sightings of what's referred to as the "Not Deer." Although websites such as 4chan, Reddit, and Tumblr are host to discussions of alleged Not Deer sightings, it's on the video-sharing social media platform TikTok where the phenomena has really taken off, with the hashtag #notdeer currently at 34.8 million views.

Unlike other cryptids, the Not Deer is characterized not as a distinctly unknown animal, but rather how it appears or behaves *in contrast* to a known animal—a deer (Cervidae). Not Deer are variously described as looking like a deer but with there being something "wrong" with them, such as having the forward-facing eyes of a predator or eyes that are judged to be too close together, a neck that's too long, a head that's misshapen, or legs that are judged to be too short and are jointed or move in unnatural ways. Alleged sightings of Not Deer have been reported mostly within Pennsylvania, North Carolina, and Connecticut, with some reported sightings as far away as Texas and Norway.

Despite millions of views associated with the hashtag #notdeer, there are few videos on TikTok of alleged sightings. Many are either users sharing *stories* about Not Deer or duetting with the few videos that are of alleged sightings. Likewise, I have not seen photographic evidence on either Reddit or Tumblr of alleged Not Deer, though of course some may surface in the future. Even in the absence of such evidence, a serious scientific investigation is still possible.

On the Trail of the Not Deer

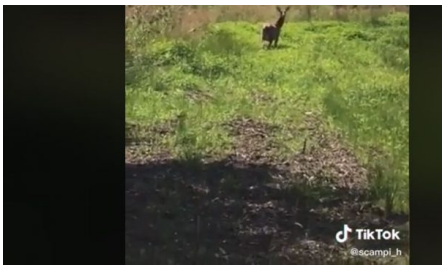
After an hour of searching through every result for #NotDeer on TikTok, filtering those results by relevance, then checking the upload date for each video (apparently TikTok doesn't have the functionality to allow you to simply sort videos from oldest to newest), the oldest video I could find was from the user @ohthatsfantastic dated May 11, 2020. (If anyone familiar with TikTok knows of an older video, please contact me.)

In the video, the user relates that "I was out at my grandparent's house here [no indication of where "here" is] hiking. I'm walking around the woods like the cryptid I am, when a few yards ahead of me I see a doe. My natural reaction is to stop because I've seen does out here before and I just want to take a minute to look at her, don't want to spook her. However, she turns and looks me in the eyes. I notice that all of her knees are bent backwards. Any direction a deer knee is supposed to go, her knees don't."

I reached out to @ohthatsfantastic for clarification on where exactly this sighting occurred and what exactly the person meant by the deer's knees being bent "backwards" (as deer don't actually have knees), however I have received no response. In the absence of any corroborating evidence, this is merely an anecdote; interesting, but not much to investigate.

One of the most popular TikTok videos of Not Deer, with 1.9M views and 422.8K likes, was uploaded by @donnabhaln (real name Donovan) on July 7, 2021, and does in fact contain a sighting of ... something. What's interesting about this video is Donovan sounds perfectly calm in the video, refers to the animal as a "deer" instead of a Not Deer, and even laughs as it stands there facing him. I asked Donovan whether he believed what he saw and filmed was a Not Deer, and he replied "It's just a deer, the reserve it's on is home to various deer with deformities and injuries. Not frightened

cause I see deer often just never out in the open like that. Many hide due to past trauma with hunters/traffickers" (Donovan 2021).



Although Not Deer are most popular on TikTok, my hunch was that the idea didn't start there. To try and locate the origin of the Not Deer, I knew I had to look elsewhere. At first, it seemed as though Not Deer really might be a recent phenomenon. For instance, the subReddit r/notdeer was only created in February 2021. However, I soon realized Not Deer did in fact have an older history. For example, under r/notdeer there's a crosspost from another subReddit, r/creepygreentexts. The post from r/creepygreentexts was made by redditor u/carld135 in 2019, titled "Anon Goes Hiking." However, the original 4chan post was much older, dated September 25, 2014. In the post, the anon claimed to have been walking through the woods one night when they noticed "something moving across the field not more than 30 yards away." The anon described it as: "Really weird looking thing with pointed ears and an elongated snout crossing my path on all fours while moving in a way that reminded me of a deer trying to learn how to walk immediately after having been born. Only it doesn't look like a deer, more like a cobbled together toy of one. And it's fucking enormous."

The description of what the anon claims to have seen seems to match most descriptions of Not Deer, but curiously, the anon never referred to it as such. So far as I can tell, the first mention of the Not Deer by that name was a post made August 21, 2019, by Tumblr user Will-o-the-Witch (real name Madison) on her page, Have a Magical Day. An anonymous user asked "What do you mean That's Not A Deer in the mountains near you?" to which Madison replied "Anyone who spends decent amount of time in Appalachia knows the Not Deer" and goes on to describe it: "more or less what I'd call a folk cryptid. Everybody has their story about it. They're all somewhat similar. You're in a car at night, in a rural, heavily wooded area, and probably a bit lost. It's not wildly uncommon to see a opossum crossing the road, see blips of little animals with your headlights. You see a deer. So you/your friends go 'Oh! Deer!' and slow down in case it leaps in front of you. Then you see it more clearly. There's just something *wrong about it*. There's something about its eyes. You feel your stomach get heavy like a rock, the hair on your neck raise. You sense intelligence that you shouldn't. It doesn't move like a deer, it moves like a … oh god, what *is that thing?* Whatever that thing is, it's not a deer and *we need to leave*. You hit the gas and get the hell out of there."

A redditor named u/justme357 read Madison's page and in 2019, under the subReddit r/Appalachia, started a post "Not Deer Stories" asking "Hey guys so I don't know a lot or really anything about Appalachia, but I recently read some tumblr textpost about an Appalachian cryptid or local folklore about deer that people see that are Wrong." Madison, under the redditor name of Darth-Skvader replied: "Hey there! This is actually my post. It's cool seeing how it's actually taken off recently and started making its rounds outside of Tumblr, which I never expected. I'll admit the 'anyone in Appalachia' thing was more about telling a good story and setting the scene than me really expecting everyone to know it. That said, within my personal area and the people I run with, there definitely ARE a lot of stories about the Not Deer that people will recognize, like 'Oh yeah, I HAVE seen that, it's a thing.' I don't live there anymore, but I used to live in NC and most of my stories about the Not Deer come from the area surrounding Boone … Ultimately, though, my main goal was to share the story of a local cryptid with all the campfirey goodness a good cryptid story should have."

Several TikTok videos refer to the story of Not Deer originating from North Carolina, although people either seem unaware of or fail to credit Madison's Tumblr post. In my correspondence with Madison, she reiterated: "I'm from the Carolinas, largely North Carolina until recently, so largely the southern Appalachian Mountain area. The word 'everybody' is a bit of a hyperbole, but at least in my circles of folk (who tend to be very open minded to the spiritual and things that go bump in the night) people knew exactly what I was talking about even if they'd never heard it called the Not Deer before. I won't claim to have invented the idea of the Not Deer; it's always been a synthesis of other people's testimonies from the beginning. As far as I can tell my main contribution was just giving a name to an idea that's already existed for a while" (Madison 2021).

This is a more modest claim suggesting that far from being a local legend or part of Carolina or Appalachian folklore, the Not Deer was something believed in by a small group of people native to the region of Boone, North Carolina, until Madison posted about it online at which time it began to take on a life of its own. I reached out to several folklorists from Appalachian states to verify if something similar to Not Deer existed in any local folklore. Stephen Gencarella, professor of folklore studies at the University of Massachusetts Amherst (he lives in Lyme, Connecticut) responded to my inquiry stating: "the term 'Not Deer' isn't popular in Connecticut right now, at least not so that I can find it in recorded places. Given what you sent me, it's clear that the term comes from Appalachia, so it's entirely possible that the name has penetrated Connecticut parlance and is being shared by

small folk groups (say, hunters or teenagers) and will become more popular over time, but I think I can say with firm standing that the name of that cryptid is not yet popular in contemporary Connecticut lore" (Gencarella 2021).

Likewise, Russ Miller, the director of Meigs Point Nature Center (who cohosts a radio show with Gencarella called *Nature Folk* on the intersection of science and folklore in the region) confirmed he had not heard the term *Not Deer* from anyone in or visiting Connecticut. Gencarella's hypothesis that the term *Not Deer* is being shared by small folk groups supports my own hypothesis that the concept originated with Madison and her circle of friends and acquaintances. Additionally, Gencarella informed me that over the past several years, reports of strange deer have been on the rise in Connecticut, at least some of which are likely due to outbreaks of Epizootic Hemorrhagic Disease (EHD). "If I were a betting man, my guess would be that if EHD continues to breakout in Connecticut, it will create the perfect ground for storytelling about 'Not Deer,'" he said.

Perhaps not coincidentally back in 2019, the same year Madison's Tumblr post went live, deer in western North Carolina (where Boone is located) were dying of EHD. Furthermore, according to biologists, outbreaks of the disease tend to occur every few years. Such conditions could create the perfect opportunity for repeated sightings of bizarre or strange deer over time. This supports the hypothesis that Not Deer stories are likely both misidentification of deer and urban legend told purely for entertainment.

White People and Native American 'Magic'

The characterization of Not Deer as something trying to imitate a deer has led some to begin conflating Not Deer stories with creatures from Native American belief systems, with comments such as "Could be a connection to the Wendigo stories of the Great Lake regions" and "Sounds like a Skinwalker." I fail to see a connection between Not Deer and Wendigo; a Wendigo is an evil spirit characterized by its insatiable hunger for human flesh, described as "gaunt to the point of emaciation, its desiccated skin pulled tightly over its bones. With its bones pushing out against its skin, its complexion the ash-gray of death, and its eyes pushed back deep into their sockets" (Johnston 2001). Neither shape-shifting nor deer (Not or otherwise) seem to be connected with Wendigo folklore.

The possible relationship between Skinwalkers and the Not Deer is more obvious. According to Navajo (or Diné) folklore, Skinwalkers, or *yee naaldlooshii*, (meaning "with it, he goes on all fours") were practitioners of witchcraft capable of shape-shifting. I reached out to Noah Nez, fellow writer for *Skeptical Inquirer* who maintains a blog as the Native Skeptic, to learn more about Skinwalkers and how they may or may not be related to Not Deer. Nez explained: "Skinwalkers have a specific meaning. Like Chupacabra, it often gets called anything shape-shifting. However, depending on the tribe, witches can only change into certain forms. I have never heard of an animal-human mix that Not Deer sighting have that resemble Skinwalkers. I'm not saying there isn't a chance … but there aren't many stories that involve a hybrid, chimera that aren't metaphorical. The real fear of Skinwalkers isn't their appearance; it is the dark magic they use. We are not even supposed to talk about it. I do not believe it is related, but happens to be a similar concept of seeing a deer in the wild under strange circumstances" (Nez 2021).

In Native American folklore, creatures such as the Wendigo and the Skinwalker are used metaphorically to communicate certain values. Stories of Wendigos and Skinwalkers act as cautionary tales. By relating these well-known creatures of folklore to the Not Deer, a cryptid and contemporary urban legend, people not only fail to respect and appreciate the cultural relevance and meaning these creatures have within their specific traditions, they also demonstrate a lack of understanding and appreciation for that meaning.

D'oh! A Deer

It would be easy to dismiss Not Deer as merely a story (similar to the Dibbuk box), however, with so many people from so many different regions of the United States (and in some cases other countries) reporting alleged Not Deer sightings, I believe that at least some people really are claiming to have seen something; however, without hard evidence, these claims are purely anecdotal. That's not to say that they shouldn't be taken seriously or should be dismissed outright; it just means there really isn't much for the serious investigator to go on. It can't be discounted that some people might be fabricating stories either purely for entertainment purposes or for trolling the credulous; however, if we grant that at least some people really are seeing something they can't explain, what plausible explanations might there be?

As previously mentioned, disease is a likely cause of at least some reported Not Deer sightings. According to the CDC, deer with Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD) may exhibit "drastic weight loss (wasting), stumbling, listlessness and other neurologic symptoms" such as "decreased interactions with other animals, listlessness, lowering of the head, blank facial expression, and repetitive walking in circles or other set patterns. Excessive salivation, drooling, and grinding of the teeth also are observed." This perfectly matches some people's descriptions of Not

are observed." This perfectly matches some people's descriptions of Not Deer behavior: "I noticed the deer was heavily foaming at the mouth and seemingly frozen in time like it was hypnotized and just staring straight out into nothing." Epizootic Hemorrhagic Disease (EHD) causes many similar symptoms such as "emaciation, loss of motor control, fever, lameness, and swelling of the neck and head, difficulty breathing, loss of appetite and no fear of humans." Either of these diseases could reasonably account for the descriptions of Not Deer. It's not unreasonable to suppose that, in the absence of understanding what diseases such as CWD and EHD are and how they present in animals such as deer, a person confused and alarmed by seeing abnormal-looking deer behaving in ways they can't explain might adopt a supernatural explanation.

Zootic diseases and reported sightings of Not Deer, by themselves, are not sufficient to explain the popularity of the cryptid. Indeed, most of the TikTok videos under #notdeer are not first-hand accounts of alleged Not Deer sightings. People aren't duetting TikTok videos of Not Deer to share their own personal stories, but rather because entertaining the idea that Not Deer are real is good plain fun. As American folklorist Jan Harold Brunvand put it, "The lack of verification in no way diminishes the appeal that urban legends have for us. We enjoy them merely as stories, and tend to at least half-believe them as possibly accurate reports." Until compelling forensic evidence emerges in support of the existence of Not Deer, the most likely explanation is that they are a misidentification of ordinary, albeit sick, deer. Nevertheless, Not Deer make a good, spooky campfire story for the digital age.

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